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DEPT PASS TO EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

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TAGS: [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IS](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: SINIORA MAKES STATEMENT ON USN SHIP
PRESENCE

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (S) Summary: PM Fouad Siniora asked to meet with Charge Sison at the Grand Serail at 1330 on February 29 to discuss media reports concerning the presence of the USS Cole in international waters off Lebanon. Siniora neither criticized nor blessed the presence of the Cole. His focus was what he would say at a long-scheduled media event with ambassadors of Arab League countries that would follow the Charge's meeting. Siniora said he wanted to be able to say that the movement of the ships was not done at the request of the Lebanese government, that he had not been "consulted" beforehand, and that the ships would remain outside of territorial waters.

¶2. (S) DCM and PM's aides Mohamed Chatah and Roula Nourredine also participated. The tone of the meeting was generally positive. Charge had informed Siniora about the planned deployment of USN ships on the evening of February 27; local media had first reported the presence of the USS Cole the evening of February 28. End Summary.

¶3. (S) Siniora's tone during his meeting with Charge was not scolding or upset; it seemed Siniora wanted to test his still-draft public statement and his possible responses to questions posed by Arab League Ambassadors and others. In response to Siniora's question, Charge clarified that the information she had conveyed to him on February 27 remained unchanged. There would be no more than three ships in the vicinity at one time (one Lebanese press report talked of six ships) and the current location of the Cole and its support ship was in international waters between Lebanon and Cyprus. She also shared with the PM with the one-sentence press guidance Department provided late on February 28: "US Navy ships in the Eastern Mediterranean are there in support of our commitment to regional stability."

MESSAGE DIRECTED AGAINST IRAN,
SYRIA, ET AL.

¶4. (C) Siniora and his aides addressed another element of the statement the PM would make. When Charge noted that March 14 Secretary-General Fares Souaid had privately told us today he welcomed the U.S. move and that he hoped this development would deter Hizbollah and Syria, PM aide Mohamed Chatah responded that there was no contradiction between the PM's and Souaid's views. Chatah explained that the PM's statement would include the message that Lebanon should not be a battleground, and that Iran, Syria, Hizballah and their allies are taking actions to inspire conflict. The words in the Prime Minister's final statement that reflected this

thought read:

(U) "I reiterate my assertion to our firm position in defending Lebanon's independence, sovereignty and highest interest so that it will not be a battleground for the regional and international forces. This is a position that we have committed ourselves to during all the political crises that our country has passed through and is still, regrettably, witnessing today. We warned several times about the dangerous policies adopted by some that lead truly to using Lebanon for foreign interests at the expense of the security of the Lebanese and the building of their country as well as their independence."

¶5. (C) Separately, LAF Director of Military Intelligence (G-2) General Georges Khoury expressed to Acting DATT on February 29 very positive views about the US action to, as he put it, "use Navy ships to influence Syria."

¶6. (U) We have sent to NEA/ELA the complete text of Siniora's statement as released. This is the portion regarding the ships:

"With respect to the news about the arrival of an American warship to the eastern Mediterranean, I would like to clarify that there are no foreign warships in Lebanese territorial waters. In these waters there are only Lebanese military ships and UNIFIL which is helping Lebanon secure its water borders in accordance with UNSCR 1701. Needless to say, we did not call for any military ships from any party." (Note: The statement also includes a strong condemnation of Israel for recent actions in Gaza. End Note.)

SISON